

The Basic Principles of Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology

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Abstract: *Humanistic Psychology, also known as the third force in psychology, has risen to prominence during the mid-20th century. It is a psychological perspective, which came as a response to the limitations of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and B. F. Skinner's behaviorism. Therefore, Humanistic psychologists, namely Maslow, Alfred Adler, and Carl Rogers, tend to dismantle the cognitive psychoanalysis regards of the human self, so rather than viewing it as a fixed entity, they opt for a more humanistic and enlightened perception of this human self, conceiving of it as an internal and spiritual experience through which humans often proceed on a constant process of personal development till achieving a state of self-actualization and transcendence within a social context. Humanistic psychology is also labeled as positive psychology for the fact that it underlines the personal worth of individuals and the creative and active nature of human beings. As stated by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, the most prominent Humanistic psychologists, humans are inherently good, so human nature is essentially benevolent and positive. This paper is an attempt to review the basic principles of Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology whose premise is to emphasize the conscious awareness of needs, choices, and personal responsibility of the individual instead of focusing merely on the unconscious. Accordingly, humans' meaning of life is usually the choices they make and responsibilities they take.*

Keywords: Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology, Humanistic Psychology, Personal Development, Human Behavior

Introduction

Alfred Adler is considered one of the main humanistic psychologists of the 20th century and markedly identified among the first Neo-Freudian positions in psychology¹. Most of Adler's notions and concepts that comprise his individual psychology can be traced directly to his near death experience at age five; as well as, his World War I contributions. Individual Psychology, also referred to as Adlerian psychology, is often misconceived as essentially focusing on individuals. Yet, Adler inspired the name of his theory from the Latin word, "individuum"², that is; indivisible for the fact that he attempts to eschew reductionist views on humans. Thus, he opts for a holistic approach that perceives persons as a unity and a whole rather than a mere collection of body parts, as Adler states, "very early in my work, I found man to be a [self-consistent] unity. The foremost task of Individual Psychology is to prove this unity in each individual-in his thinking, feeling, acting, in his so-called conscious and unconscious, in every expression of his personality." (1956, p. 175)

Holism is a basic tenet of Adlerian individual psychology since his endeavor is primarily guided in viewing people as complete beings, entirely integrated through past experiences, present challenges and individual potentials ([Jon Frew, Michael D. Spiegler, 2008, p.125](#)). Adlerian theory purveys an optimistic account of human psychology and behavior affirming that individuals cannot be defined by heredity or environment, instead they are inventive, proactive and enterprising as regards the development of their life style; this is particularly operated within a socially embedded background. In this context, Adler founds his theory on the basis of several aspects the most fore grounded of which are Feeling of Inferiority and Striving for Superiority, Lifestyle, Safeguarding Behaviors and Social Interest, all of which demonstrate the holistic,

¹In *Merriam-Webster.com* "Relating to a school of psychoanalysis that differs from Freudian orthodoxy in emphasizing the importance of social and cultural factors in the development of an individual's personality", <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/neo-Freudian>>(Accessed on 5/02/2022)

² OED Online. "From classical Latin *individuum* indivisible particle, atom, in post-classical Latin also an individual, especially a member of a species, use as noun (short for *individuum corpus* indivisible body) of neuter singular of *individuus* undivided, indivisible" <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/individuum>> (Accessed on 5/02/2022)

phenomenological³, socially-oriented, and teleological (i.e., goal-directed) approach of his understanding of human workings and behaviors.

Feelings of Inferiority and Striving for Superiority

Human beings are born with natural strengths and weaknesses. This latter, being it physical or environmental may create feelings of inferiority which is a normal human experience resulting in a process of striving for superiority and development of one's self. Striving hence becomes a leading force for all individuals who tend to defeat their feelings of inferiority by striving toward constancy and affinity with their life aspirations and ideal self. This alignment is basically manifested through creativeness, success, proficiency, fulfillment, and perfection. Adler's theory is firstly listed among the early exemplars of positive theories for the fact that it explores humans' realization of their true potentials throughout an ongoing process of becoming. According to Adler, if we are to understand why people behave the way they do, we must first recognize that humans have a tendency to strive after self-created goals. "The first thing we discover in the psychic trends is that the movements are directed toward a goal; this teleology, striving for goals, is innate in the concept of adaptation" (Alfred Adler, 1927, p. 28).

Subsequently, all individuals hold a multitude of goals and objectives with respect to various aspects of their lives, and the choice of these goals is originally structured by a higher order goal called our self-ideal. That is, a perfect representation of the ideal type of oneself people dream of becoming, and its formation begins early in childhood. Adler's aspect of the self-ideal plays a crucial role in human's individual psychological growth, in that it influences their striving for superiority, which, according to Adler, is the fundamental drive behind human behavior. In other words, we are naturally driven to improve our perception in life to gain more advantageous positions, or as Adler Seymour put it, "the material of life has been constantly bent on reaching a plus from minus situation" (Adler S, 1984, p. 97).

Striving for superiority is innate, thus the specific manifestations of this striving are determined by the contentedness of the person's self-ideal and the extent to which he or she seeks to actualize it. Therefore, one of the paramount conceptions of Adler's individual psychology is that propounded in what he terms 'life style', which is the subjective, unarticulated set of guidelines and principles individuals develop and often use to move them through life and toward their goals. (Harold H. Mosak, Michael P. Maniacci, 1999, p. 47). That is to say, as we go through life, we learn what type of behaviours and thought patterns that distinctly guide us towards our self-ideal and which hinder us, thus accordingly we develop our life style. Furthermore, Adler highlights the notion that it is inadequate, in a priori manner, to judge a lifestyle for being healthy or unhealthy and normal or abnormal, whilst it can only be observed in action and see what success it manifests. For Adler, there is no such thing called "normal" life style; "Every Life style is adequate, until life presents it with a task for which it is not prepared; it is at those times that its weak points emerge." (Harold Mosak and Michael Maniacci, 1997, p. 58)

The weak points in humans' life styles usually frustrate their pursuit of superiority and trigger feelings of inferiority that are based on their self-concept; or, in other words, the subjective evaluations individuals concretize of themselves, and the conclusions they draw with respect to their abilities and potentials to reach their life goals. Inferiority feelings are often induced by what Adler calls 'objective inferiorities', these are based on some measurable standards in juxtaposition to others; for example, people may objectively feel inferior when it comes to their strength or height, the amount of money they earn or their skills at a given activity. However, an objective inferiority only triggers feeling of inferiority if it is somehow substantial to people striving after superiority and reaching a self-ideal. Another inferiority that Adler explores is called Organ Inferiority, which is considered as the basis of human striving, especially in cases of inherent diseases or psychical defects; Adler wrote that "the organs most disturbed ... are those which have been made susceptible by some inherited weakness." (1956, p. 287) In this context, it is requisite to provide ones' self an appropriate compensation to overcome such inferiority in an effective manner.

The way in which individuals react and adapt to their inferiorities strongly impacts the psychological health in the inclusive quality of their life. Adler proposes that there are two primary ways people deal with

³In *Merriam-Webster.com* "The study of the development of human consciousness and self-awareness as a preface to or a part of philosophy" < <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phenomenology> > Accessed on (5/02/2022)

feelings of inferiority. The first is by conceiving of life circumstances as challenges to be confronted and hence make use of coping behaviors. Whereas the second by reviewing them as problems to be avoided and immediately resort to safeguarding tendencies. Coping behaviours can also be divided into two types: direct problem solving and compensation. When people believe they are able to directly address the cause of their inferiority feelings, they adopt a direct problem-solving approach. Besides, if their skills are inadequate in a certain endeavour people spend time improving them. Yet, in case direct problem solving is impossible, they may resort to the coping behavior called compensation. That is, we seek new ways to make up for our inferiority by excelling in a manner which can compensate for our deficits. For instance, individuals who lose their auditory perception may substitute it by cultivating the ability to read lips.

Safeguarding Behaviors

Many people however tend to refuse addressing their issues in such manner and so turn to safeguarding behaviors. These are often deployed in the attempt to convince one and others that certain obstacles which lie outside of their control contribute in impeding their progress. Adler claims that safeguarding behaviors resemble to the sideshows that are displayed at a circus for they are utilized for the sake of distracting attention away from the most stressing issues in life and direct it instead to trivial ones. In addition, Safeguarding behaviors take a variety of forms the most crucial of which are the Construction of Obstacles; “These are less severe cases, in which the individual always manages somehow to be active in life and may even be prominent”. (Heinzl. Ansbacher, Rowena R. Ansbacher, 1964, p. 275) Put differently, some people manifest specific physical issues, such as headaches or chronic tiredness while others develop anxiety disorders and fear as a pretext for their inability to face up to their challenges.

Another form of Safeguarding behaviors is what Adler labels as Distance Seeking which entails procrastination or merely taking the smallest steps forward before going back to ones’ confront zone. Nevertheless, given the fact that most people use safeguarding behaviors to one degree or another, they may be of big problem when they are overly used and for too long. As for Adler, those who tend to rely on safeguarding behaviors are “pitiful individuals who make use of transparent tricks in order to escape life duties”. (Henri Ellenberger, 1970, p. 596)

As a result, Safe guarding behaviors are never reliable and take only short time and will eventually lose their effectiveness. Thus, people have two options; either they start addressing their issues head on, or they can easily withdraw from the challenge and hence develop what Adler calls an inferiority complex.

The inferiority [symptom] complex describes the attitude of an individual who by this complex expresses that he is not in the position to solve an existing problem. It must not be confused with the inferiority feeling. The inferiority [symptom] complex is the presentation of the person to himself and others that he is not strong enough to solve a given problem in a socially useful way. Needless to say, no point of rest is given in this way. The total mood with all its thought, feeling, and action material is continued into failure. (Heinzl. Ansbacher, Rowena R. Ansbacher, 1964, p. 250)

Correspondingly, in order to evade such fate, individuals must cease believing and relying on safeguarding behaviors while they are able to stand tall and directly confront life challenges. Adler contends that sometimes people have recourse to safeguarding behaviors for the fact that they have adopted an overly perfectionist self-ideal which is uncondusive to a balanced life style, so being more aware of one’s life goals and adjusting ourselves to a realistic self-ideal is a decisive step toward self-improvement.

However, individual psychology stresses on humans’ free will to learn to be more courageous regardless how unrealistic their self-ideal can be. As Adler states, “only those are able to muster the courage to advance on the useful side who consider themselves a part of the whole, who are at home on this earth and in this mankind.” (Adler, 1956, p. 159) Adler considers the process of cultivating a courageous attitude among people as the most basic concern of psychotherapy. Courage is not a faculty one either possesses or lack rather it is the willingness to engage in a risk taking conduct regardless its consequences provided that we are able to assume the responsibility of our choices in life. As a matter of fact, life is full of inevitable challenges and stressing tasks, in this sense, humans have a choice either they develop a courageous attitude and coping behaviors or waste away their days by receding to safeguarding tendency. This idea is clearly illustrated in Bill Wilson saying: “I do believe that life is just a day in school. All our experiences are but lessons in

some form or other which condition us for our larger destiny. What matters, and what matters only is what we do with the problems.”(Susan Cheever, 2004, p. 43)

Social Interests

Gardner Murphy indicates in his *Historical Introduction to Modern Psychology* that “Adler’s psychology was the first psychological system in the history of psychology that was developed in what we should today call a social-science direction.” (1982, p. 341). Adlerian psychology is essentially founded on the social aspect of human nature. Based on Adler’s experiences during the First World War, he draws on the importance of the social context of his theory to the extent that he is convinced that human survival is dependent on several humanistic reforms most essential of which constitute his Individual Psychology. Therefore, there is an existing discrepancy between Sigmund Freud psychoanalysis and Adler’s Individual Psychology. This latter highlights the concept of social interest as the pinnacle of humans’ psychological development and identifies social behavior as the driving force, rather than Freud’s sexual drives and libido.

Adler gives prominence to environmental and societal agency, and focuses on teleology over causality, that is, expounding human behavior in terms of future goals more than past causes. Adler advances that individuals are socially embedded hence they cannot be adequately examined apart from their social background. Thereby, our social interest is basically related to Adlerian aspects on the tasks of life which are love, society, work, spirituality, and self. Humans explore certain relationship within each task; that is to say; as we go through life, we experience love relationships, relationships with friends, at work, relationship with ourselves, and with God or the universe. Similarly to Adler’s view,

Darwin already pointed out that one never finds weak animals living alone. Man must be included among these, particularly because he is not strong enough to live alone. He has only little resistance against nature, he needs a larger amount of aids to live and preserve himself. Now we can understand that man could maintain himself only when he placed himself under particularly favorable conditions. These, however, were afforded to him only by group life. Group life proved to be a necessity because it alone enabled man, through a division of labor, to solve problems in which the individual as such would have been condemned to failure. (Heinzl. Ansbacher, Rowena R. Ansbacher, 1964, p. 129)

According to Adler, Social interest or community feeling is the genuine and inevitable compensation for most human natural deficiencies. Indeed, Individuals, even biologically regarded, are intrinsically social beings, since they need a sense of belongings to a group or a community within which “the feeling of worth and value is heightened, giving courage and an optimistic view, and there is a sense of acquiescence in the common advantages and drawbacks of our lot. The individual feels at home in life and feels his existence to be worthwhile just so far as he is useful to others.” (Heinzl. Ansbacher, Rowena R. Ansbacher, 1964, p. 155)

Adlerian psychology is known for its holistic, theological and phenomenological perspectives given that it highlights humans’ psychological development, striving for superiority and social interests. Even though Adler has not received a high recognition compared to Freud psychoanalysis, his influence is clearly seen within humanistic psychology. “Adler once proclaimed that he was more concerned that his theories survived than that people remembered to associate his theories with his name”.(Mosak, 1989, p. 69) The main premise of Adler’s theory resides in his conviction that the source of humans’ suffering is not to be found in the way life challenges us, but rather in the solutions people endorse to face such challenges.

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